DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 208 422 CS 206 631

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TITLE Hierarchies of Skill in the Composing Process: A Review of Current Research.
PUB DATE 8 May 81
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Writing Centers Association (3rd, Clarion, PA, May 8, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Developmental Stages; *Individual Development; Language Processing; Literature Reviews; Maturity (Individuals); Persuasive Discourse; Sentence Structure; Writing (Composition); *Writing Processes; *Writing Research; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness; *Invention (Rhetorical)

ABSTRACT

A review of the literature reveals that three writing skills have been of particular interest to writing researchers recently. First, work on planning the rhetorical strategy recognizes three components of the planning process: prewriting, pausing, and reviewing what has been written. Second, research on audience analysis indicates that maturity is an important factor in the construction and maintenance of repertoires for appealing to an audience, and that writing exercises should reflect the level of student development in the area of audience awareness. Third, current work on information processing has focused on the rate of distribution of new information to be presented against a background of old information, reflecting the principle of "peak positions" within sentences. Other research in this area has focused on the differences in how beginning and experienced writers employ abstractions in their compositions. Overall, recent research on composing shows that it is the development of their skill in the areas of planning rhetorical strategy, analyzing the audience, and processing information that distinguishes beginning writers from skilled writers. (RL)

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HIERARCHIES OF SKILL IN THE COMPOSING PROCESS
A REVIEW OF CURRENT RESEARCH

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The consensus of current work on composing appears to be that all writers possess the basic composing skills but that they differ in their mastery of these skills. The hierarchies in this essay refer to the differences in the writer's abilities to employ these strategies. Before discussing this question of hierarchies of skill in the composing process, it is necessary to define what these skills are. The best formulation of these abilities that I have come across has been made by Lev Vygotsky (1962). His prime concern here is the analysis of the skills that differentiate speaking from writing. Although these modes of sharing information possess many similarities, it is their dissimilarities that most illuminate the nature of composition in writing. The leap from verbal to written communication requires just what I am calling composing skills. These are the activities an author engages in to get his thoughts ready for inscription.

Vygotsky nicely focusses the three major attributes that distinguish writing from speech.The first distinction is that:

A. "Writing also requires deliberate analytical action on the part of the child . . . deliberate structuring of the web of speech." This is the planning component of writing.

B. The second distinction is that "Writing is also speech without an interlocutor, addressed to an absent or an imaginary person or to no one in particular. . . . In written speech, we are obliged to create the situation, to represent it to ourselves. This demands detachment from the actual situation." This is the skill of audience analysis.

C. The third distinction is that "Even its (writing) minimal development requires a high level of abstraction--it is the abstract quality of written language that is the main stumbling block." I see this as the information processing component of written communication.

Thus Vygotsky has laid out the three skills that still command the attention of researchers in the composing process. These skills are (1) planning the rhetorical structure, (2) analyzing an audience, (3) processing information.

I became interested in this question of hierarchies of skill because in working with students and their writing I wondered if there were an overall scheme that structured the acquisition of writing skills. For example, should a student first examine his audience, then assess the subject at hand, and finally plan a rhetorical strategy? Or should the last step precede the second? On the basis of the reading I've done, it appears that learning to write is analagous to learning to walk, a subject Paul, my eight month old son, has forced me to explore. Although some babies scoot along on their bellies, then crawl on hands and knees, then pull themselves up on to objects and ultimately, after thoroughly testing the impact resistance

of their craniums, launch into bipedal locomotion, any one of these steps is expendable and the order of their occurrence arbitrary. From the reading I have done, it appears that a similar random order exists in the development of composing skills. Research since Vygotsky has verified the importance of the three skills that he felt contributed to the act of writing, but it has not substantially increased our knowledge about the order in which these skills are acquired or employed.

I shall deal, in turn, with recent work on planning a rhetorical strategy, analyzing an audience, and processing information. In each area I will concentrate on the practical implications of the research.

PLANNING A RHETORICAL STRATEGY

Current theory recognizes three components of the planning process: prewriting, during which the author analyzes his task and audience; pausing, which takes place during the writing when the writer decides what to say next; and rescanning, which is the act of reviewing what has already been written to assure that each section will mesh smoothly with the last.

Linda Flower and John Hayes (1980) have followed up Janet Emig's (1971) investigations into the composing process and found that when writers plan, they concentrate on two major aspects of the rhetorical problem. One concern is the rhetorical situation, or writer's given, which includes the audience and assignment. The other issue is the set of goals the writer creates himself. The dominant goals they observed greatly resemble the features that Vygotsky described as distinguishing writing from speaking. These objectives were:

First, deciding how to affect the reader;
Second, deciding what relationship to establish with the reader--fabricating a persona;
Third, building a coherent network of ideas, creating a meaning;
Fourth, constructing the formal or conventional features of a written text.

In their project Flower and Hayes posed to novice and experienced writers the problem of writing about their job for readers of Seventeen Magazine. The results of their work led them to conclude that "One of the most telling differences between . . . good writers and poor writers was the degree to which they created a unique, fully developed representation of this unique rhetorical problem." In other words, good writers considered more parts of the rhetorical problem, and they considered them more thoroughly.

An earlier piece of research by Sharon Pianko (1977) corroborates Flower and Hayes' findings. Pianko observed that remedial writers devoted significantly less time to all aspects of the planning process (prewriting, pausing, and rescanning) than did traditional students. As a result of her study, Pianko comes to a conclusion quite similar to

that reached by Flower and Hayes: "What characterizes 'poor' writers . . . is their undeveloped composing processes. . . . Although the processes are the same for traditional writers and remedial writers, they are of much shorter duration, and of poorer quality."

As well as in their analysis of the nature of the deficiencies that separate beginning from experienced writers, these two studies concur in the steps they recommend to remedy these differences. Of the two Pianko phrases the practical implications more forcefully.

> If teachers are to affect a positive change in students' written products, they must change the focus from the evaluating and correcting of finished papers to helping students expand and elaborate the stages of their composing process.

A system that might help instructors investigate and improve students' composing process has been devised by Sondra Perl (1979). She has devised a system of notation for verbal and written protocols taken during composing. Another method that ought to facilitate improvement in faulty composing activities is the use of structured invention procedures, heuristics. Lauer (1979) and Kinney (1979) are authors who have done useful work on this subject.

AUDIENCE ANALYSIS

In the second area I shall consider, audience analysis and appeal, the most conclusive work has been done by Donald Rubin and Gene Piche (1979). They set fourth, eigth, and twelfth graders, and adults the task of trying to persuade three different audiences (high, intermediate, and low intimacy) of the benefits of glass recycling. Of the variables they examined, the most significant was the number and variety of appeal types. As the writers aged, they used a greater number and range of strategies in their attempt to persuade their audience

This study demonstrated that the possession of a repertoire of ways of appealing to an audience and the recognition that these tactics must be used often in persuasive writing is a feature that undergoes changes as a writer matures. Perceiving the instructional implications of their discovery, Rubin and Piche recommend that:

> A composition curriculum should not pitch its exercises beyond students' abilities to induce theoretical principles, though rhetorical development may be accelerated by the "developmental pull" of carefully designed desequilibrating experiences.

INFORMATION PROCESSING

Information processing, the last of the facets of the composing process, is, because of its newness, both the most exciting and the most difficult to discuss. Current work excites because it raises a variety of new directions, but this same diversity makes it difficult to present this material in an orderly fashion.

The clearest formulation of the place that information processing occupies in the act of composing has been made by Robert De Beaugrande (1979 "Moving," 1979 "Psychology"). To discuss the factors affecting the readibility of a text, De Beaugrande (1979 "Moving") theorized that composing has three levels of options and of decision making to composing. Each of these levels is successively further from the text and closer to the writer's overall purpose.

The first level deals with decisions about sentence structure--that is about grammatical and syntactic options.

The second level affects the structure of events, actions, and situations. Here the writer selects the form to put the information into and decides what shall be presented.

The third level determines the rate of distribution of new information to be presented against a background of old information.

The first two levels need not concern us since they do not deal with any strikingly new concepts. The third concept, however, poses some difficulty because it depends on a little known principle, that of peak position. To clarify this term De Beaugrande demonstrated that within sentences there are positions at which the reader's attention is heightened. By using these points judiciously, a skillful writer can clarify his meaning.

To comprehend the application of this theory, consider these three openings to a brief paragraph describing an encounter between an old man and his dog and a pesty child. The first version consists of four sentences: "Yesterday, I saw an old man. He was leading an ugly dog. The dog was wearing a bright orange collar. The collar attracted a small child." This sentence is obviously choppy and immature. Sentence combining would suggest that these pieces ought to be brought together, producing something like this "Yesterday, an old man I saw whose dog's leash, attached to a bright orange collar, attracting to it a small child, was held in his hand." This sentence is more complex than the first, but it has replaced monotony with confusion. A third version, "Yesterday, I saw an old man leading an ugly dog. The dog's bright orange collar attracted a small child." conveys the writer's meaning more clearly because it makes better use of peak positions. The first peak is occupied by "an ugly dog," a concept central to the account. The second important peak comes on "a small child," an important actor in this narrative. Thus in the third version new information is presented against a background of old information in such a fashion that the reader's attention is constantly focused

on new important material.

Once De Beaugrande's theories are fully investigated, they ought to suggest valuable applications for informing writers as to the most effective methods for processing and presenting information.

A more conventional aspect of information processing is abstraction. The differences in the extent to which beginning and experienced writers employ this skill have been established by Lunsford (1980), Dilworth, Reising, and Wolfe (1978). Research by Freedman and Pringle (1980) demonstrates that older writers abstracted more frequently than younger writers. The practical implications of these discoveries have been set forth by Andrea Lunsford (1980) : "The real challenge for us as teachers of basic writing lies in helping our students become more proficient at abstracting and conceptualizing."

SUMMATION

In summation, beginning writers are not different from skilled writers because they do not possess planninng, audience analysis or information processing skills but because their skills in these areas are either imperfectly or incompletely developed. As the researchers I have cited recommend, our responsibility as teachers of writing is to demonstrate to our students methods for improving their composing processes.

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HIERARCHIES OF SKILL IN THE COMPOSING PROCESS:
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